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A spent force?: the Clan Donald in the aftermath of 1493¹

Alison Cathcart

From a traditional, perhaps even Lowland, perspective, the 1493 forfeiture of the lordship of the Isles was the death blow to an unruly, disloyal kindred beyond the reach of royal authority to which it was consistently antagonistic. It brought about the destruction of MacDonald dominance in the west coupled with the rise of the house of Argyll and, by the end of the sixteenth century, the Mackenzies of Kintail, both clans that were loyal to the crown. Indeed, the increased assertion of royal authority throughout the western Highlands and Isles culminated in the 'pacification' of the region by James VI following his succession to the thrones of England and Ireland in 1603. However, such an interpretation of events reflects traditional prejudices against Highland clanship, regarded as barbaric and backwards, and asserts the inevitable triumph of the crown and civilised, law-abiding society. Thus it juxtaposes the ascendancy of royal authority against the demise of Clan Donald and views the forfeiture of 1493 as an end point. While 1493 may have signalled the end of the lordship as it had existed since the early fourteenth century, this paper seeks to question the extent to which MacDonald influence in the west was cauterised by one single, albeit hugely significant event.

Island rebellions

Whatever the interpretation of the forfeiture of 1493, it is clear that the initial forfeiture of 1476 severely weakened the MacDonald lordship and hastened its demise. In 1476 John, fourth Lord, lost Kintyre, Knapdale and the earldom of Ross, after which divisions that had existed within the lordship widened.² Angus Óg, John's son and recognised heir, who had played a prominent role within the lordship prior to the forfeiture of 1476, resented what he regarded as his father's humiliating submission to the crown. Immediately afterwards he may have tried to enlist his father's support in efforts to recover former lordship territory but by 1480 there was conflict between the two men and dissent within the wider Clan Donald.³ Angus set out to deprive John 'of all management and authority' which culminated in a sea battle near Tobermory in 1481, generally known as the battle of Bloody Bay.⁴ Angus, at the head of the Clan Donald, fought against his father who was supported by the chiefs of other lordship clans. After a seemingly inconclusive outcome at Bloody Bay, Angus' actions suggest that, despite his father's position, it was the son who had real influence throughout the lordship. He attempted to recover former lordship territories, mainly through force, and maintained the islanders 'in obedience while he was sole lord over them'.⁵ By 1485 he appears to have been reconciled to his father but further efforts to recover the earldom of Ross were brought to an abrupt end when in 1490 he was murdered by his own Irish harper.⁶ In the aftermath 'the Islanders, and the rest of the Highlanders, were let loose, and began to shed one another's blood', unrest which contributed to the final forfeiture of 1493.⁷

Evidently, John was no longer able to perform the vital function of maintaining stability in the west and, as internal divisions deepened, the writing was on the wall for the lordship. If the

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Steve Boardman, Jane Dawson and Allan Macinnes for comments on (much) earlier drafts of this paper.

² *RMS*, ii, 1246; *APS*, ii, 108-9, 111, 113; *ALI*, nos. 109a, 109b. John also lost all castles within these lands and the sheriffdom of Inverness and Nairn.

³ *ALI*, no. 117; N Macdougall, 'Achilles' Heel? The Earldom of Ross, the Lordship of the Isles, and the Stewart Kings, 1449-1507' in E J Cowan and R A McDonald (eds), *Alba. Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (East Linton, 2000), 262.

⁴ *HP*, i, 47-50.

⁵ *HP*, i, 52.

⁶ *ALI*, nos. 119, 121; A Cameron, 'The Book of Clanranald' in *Reliquiae Celticae: texts papers and studies in Gaelic literature and philology* (eds), A MacBain and J Kennedy (Inverness, 1892-94), vol ii, 163; *HP*, i, 51-2. Angus had his throat cut while he slept.

⁷ *HP*, i, 52; N Macdougall, *James IV* (Edinburgh 1989), 100-101.

island Lord could not deliver on this front, his position was vulnerable. While previous Lords had retained their dominant position in the west despite instances of rebellion because of their ability to secure overall stability, by the late fifteenth century circumstances had changed and both crown and parliament were less tolerant of Highland unrest, especially when the repercussions of this unrest were felt in the Lowlands.⁸ The main problem was what to put in its place once MacDonald power had been removed. Successive monarchs and governments attempted to deal with the post-forfeiture situation in various ways ranging from military expeditions to gain submissions and impose royal authority, and imprisonment, to co-operation and collaboration. However, the piecemeal implementation of such policies served to intensify unrest so the crown relied increasingly on regional power structures to deal with events in the region; specifically the Campbell earls of Argyll and the Gordon earls of Huntly. Thus the inconsistent and ultimately ineffective policy on the part of crown contributed to the general malaise that existed post-forfeiture and ensured the repercussions lasted much longer than initial spontaneous uprisings.

The widespread discontent in the Isles was further heightened by a real sense of dislocation. Following the death of Angus Óg, it was unclear where authority within the lordship lay. John appeared ever more the lame duck as he submitted to the crown, while Alexander MacDonald of Lochalsh, cousin of Angus Óg, came to assume greater prominence within the clan.⁹ But, regardless of how ineffectual John was as lord and chief, his grandson would become a significant figure in the western Isles. Donald Dubh was the product of the marriage of Angus Óg and Isabella, daughter of Colin Campbell, first earl of Argyll. Following the death of Angus Óg, Argyll took Isabella back into his care at which time she was either pregnant or Donald was only a few months old.¹⁰ Although often perceived to have been a period of imprisonment, Argyll's relationship to his grandson at this time should be regarded as one of guardianship.¹¹ Nonetheless, despite his kin credentials, there was no escaping the fact that Donald was a minor. With no authoritative leadership in the Isles following the forfeiture, and as individual chiefs now moved to gain crown title to their lands, discontent and dislocation soon materialised in festering grievances and bitter rivalries. The inability of the crown to deal with the situation it had created resulted in more risings by individuals who sought to exploit the widespread discontent for their own ends.

A few months after the 1493 forfeiture James IV undertook a naval expedition to the Isles to assert royal authority in the region. Alexander of Lochalsh and John MacDonald of Dunivaig

⁸ *ALI*, lxx-lxxi, lxxiv-lxxviii, no. 75; R J Tanner, *The Late Medieval Scottish Parliament: Politics and the Three Estates, 1424-1488* (East Linton, 2001), 27-8, 44-5, 131-2, 160-3, 210-12.

⁹ *ALI*, nos. 122-4; *AU*, iii, 383; K A Steer and J W M Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (RCAHMS, 1977), 207. Alexander of Lochalsh is referred to as MacDonald's deputy and in 1492 he is found granting a charter along with John. More significantly, three days earlier 'Alexander of the Isles of Lochalsh' granted lands within the lordship of Lochalsh and the lordship of Lochcarron to the chief of the Clan Cameron 'with the consent of his council', much as Angus Óg had done a few years earlier. John began to toe the royal line following the forfeiture of 1493, and later received a pension from the crown. He died at Dundee in 1503. See *TA*, i, 233, 235, 266, 308; ii, 301, 344, 354, 357; *ER*, x, lix; xi, 123.

¹⁰ 'Book of Clanranald', 163 and *ALI*, lxxii suggest Isabella was pregnant at the time. *HP*, i, 50 says that Donald Dubh was three years old when taken into Argyll's 'custody'. In *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, II, no.40, Donald himself later states in a letter to Henry VIII that while 'in his mother's womb [he] was carried off to captivity and almost until this time has been kept in prison and fetters'. See *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, II, no.294 (135) where the Islesmen assert that Donald, 'the earl of Ross our master, now the king's subject, lay in prison before he was born'. For Campbell marriage policy and reasons why Argyll acted in this way see A Cathcart, 'Inressing of kyndnes and renewing off thair blud': the family, kinship and clan policy in the sixteenth century Scottish Highlands' in E Ewen and J Nugent (eds), *Finding the Family in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Aldershot, 2008), 127-38, especially 134-6 and 135 n.34.

¹¹ *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, II, 40, 198, 294. Despite mentioning his imprisonment on several occasions during which time he asserts Argyll took his possessions from him, Donald never accuses Argyll of having been his captor.

and the Glens submitted to the king but Alexander was soon in open rebellion.¹² Although hard to disentangle from issues relating to the lordship, the rebellion may have been prompted by personal, familial matters. Kenneth Mackenzie, son and heir of Alexander, seventh of Kintail, married Finvola, daughter of Celestine of the Isles, niece of John, fourth Lord, around 1465.¹³ At some point between 1480 and 1490 Mackenzie ‘uncourteously’ divorced his wife albeit after the birth of a son, and remarried Ann, daughter of Hugh Fraser, third of Lovat.¹⁴ Lochalsh’s attack, therefore, may have aimed at ‘the destruction of Kintail’ as revenge for Mackenzie’s treatment of his MacDonald wife.¹⁵ While the Mackenzies had maintained close relations with the Lords of the Isles prior to 1476, after the 1493 forfeiture they began to distance themselves from the MacDonalds, seeking rehabilitation with the crown. It was a successful policy making gains in Ross, albeit a move clearly resented by the MacDonalds who regarded the earldom as an integral part of the lordship.¹⁶ Lochalsh’s rising, however, was quickly suppressed by the Mackenzies, a defeat which was said to have ‘lost the MacDonalds their supremacy in Ross for ever’.¹⁷

Although Alexander was killed in the immediate aftermath while trying to gather more forces, it was his son, Donald of Lochalsh, who raised rebellion in the west in 1513 taking full advantage of the vulnerability of the political elite following the defeat at Flodden.¹⁸ Donald had been

¹² ER, x, lxi; D H Caldwell, *Islay: the land of the lordship* (Edinburgh, 2008), 69. On this occasion both were said to have been knighted and Alexander received a promise that all freeholders in the isles would be infeft in their lands. D Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland, 1493-1625* (Edinburgh, 1836), 92, postures the rebellion was either an attempt to regain Ross, or an attempt to revenge his earlier defeat at the hands of the Mackenzies during the battle of Blair na Parc in 1491. It is possible this attack by Alexander is the Battle of Park referred to in the oral accounts. According to HP, i, 55-6; ‘Book of Clanranald’, 165, Alexander is said to have led a devastating raid on Inverness in 1491 but subsequently suffered a defeat at the hands of the Mackenzies during the battle of Blair na Parc. A J Haddow, *The History and Structure of Ceol Mor* (Glasgow, 1982), 32 argues there is musical and oral evidence for a battle at Park which he suggests occurred in 1488 rather than 1491, although here Haddow follows the argument taken by A Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonalds and Lords of the Isles* (Inverness, 1881).

¹³ ALI, B 42. Marriage dispensation dated 13 September 1465. Most later sources confuse this stating it was Margaret, a daughter of John, who married Kenneth Mackenzie.

¹⁴ Highland Regional Archives [hereafter HRA] D225/B4/a, MS ‘History of the Clan Mackenzie’ by the Western Clans of Deasaich, n.d., f 51; Gregory, *History*, 83. This was a more politically-acceptable connection, especially in the wake of the forfeiture of 1476.

¹⁵ HRA, D225/B4/a. f 48.

¹⁶ Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 205 suggest the Lords of the Isles had been opposed consistently by the Mackenzies since 1411. For a detailed assessment of MacDonald-Mackenzie relations see A MacCoinnich, ‘Kingis rabellis’ to ‘Cuidich ‘n Righ’? Clann Choinnich: the emergence of a kindred, c.1475-c.1514’ in S Boardman and A Ross (eds), *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland c.1200-1500* (Dublin, 2003), 175-200. The significance of Ross had been clearly conveyed to the island clans through the actions of previous lords. Alexander, third Lord of the Isles, had ‘lived as Earl of Ross rather than as Lord of the Isles’ while John, fourth Lord, also concentrated on securing the earldom to the detriment, and ultimate loss, of the lordship. It was a region that proved economically advantageous to the island lords but it also ensured that, as earls of Ross, they were regarded as important magnates within Scotland no longer confined to the western periphery. Indeed, economic reasons are paramount when explaining why James III forfeited the earldom in 1476. See Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 207; J Munro, ‘The Lordship of the Isles’ in L Maclean (ed), *The Making of the Middle Ages in the Highlands* (Inverness, 1981), 29; MacDougall, ‘Achilles’ Heel?’, 255, 257, 275.

¹⁷ HRA, D286 Mackenzie of Portmore; HP, i, 55-6; *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis: consisting of original papers and documents relating to the history of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (eds), D Gregory and W F Skene (Edinburgh, 1847), 321.

¹⁸ Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 106, 113-26. Following the death of his father, Donald had been taken into the custody of the king himself and apparently became a great favourite of James IV. On account of this friendship, and in the hope that Donald would provide a stabilizing

present at the battle, where he was knighted, but on returning to his estates he sought to exploit the political situation and gathered momentum for a rising aimed at restoration of the lordship.¹⁹ There is said to have been two rebellions, one from 1513 to 1515, and another from 1516 to 1519.²⁰ Little is known of either but in this action Lochalsh was joined by Alexander MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens in an insurrection aimed directly at John MacIain of Ardnamurchan.²¹ MacIain had been responsible for the deaths of the fathers of both Lochalsh and Dunivaig and, on account of his policy of co-operation with the crown, had made gains at their expense. They took the opportunity to extract revenge under the guise of lordship restoration.²² When it became clear that Lochalsh had a personal agenda, Dunivaig and others, including Lauchlan MacLean of Duart, soon turned from open rebellion to self-preservation. In March 1516-17 they petitioned government, arguing Lochalsh had told them he was acting with the authority of the Governor, John Stewart, fourth duke of Albany. Instead, Lochalsh ‘showed “in word and deed” that he was “wylfull to dystrow the said landis [of the Isles] and the kingis legis the inhabitouris of thaim be slachter, herschip, fyr and commone opressione eftir his puer” and would not take counsel’.²³ Dunivaig, MacLean and John MacLean of Lochbuie asked for a remission of their crimes and a grant of lands that belonged to their respective clan estates. In return they would be “leile and trew to the kingis grace, my lord governour and to the realme ... and assist supple and help Colyne erle of Ergile, lieuetenent of the Ylis” who the government turned to in order to deal with the situation in the west and who restored stability relatively quickly through negotiation.²⁴ While the islanders were ready to join together in rebellion under the banner of lordship restoration, when this failed they were just as quick to preserve their own individual position and submit to central authority.²⁵

Alexander MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens rebelled again in 1529, the result of a local, personal dispute with Archibald, fourth earl of Argyll, concerning the MacIain inheritance during which MacDonald, along with MacLean of Duart, attacked Campbell lands.²⁶ In the light of

influence in the west, James allowed him to inherit his father’s estates, despite the fact that Alexander of Lochalsh was killed while in rebellion.

¹⁹ *ER*, xiv, cxxxvii-cxxviii, 55, refers to ‘the rebels of the Isles, who were attempting to establish the title of Sir Donald of Lochaber as Lord of the Isles’.

²⁰ ‘Book of Clanranald’, 164-5.

²¹ ‘Book of Clanranald’, 165 states that Lochalsh and Dunivaig had conspired to divide the isles between them with Dunivaig having dominion south of Ardnamurchan. Such an aim is somewhat unrealistic. It is more likely that the two men wanted to regain land lost to them after the forfeiture. See Caldwell, *Islay*, 78.

²² *HP*, i, 60-1; ‘Book of Clanranald’, 163-5; *TA*, i, 238-9; Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 210; Caldwell, *Islay*, 70-1, 79. MacIain sought and gained crown favour after the forfeiture and delivered John MacDonald of Dunivaig and three of his sons, wanted for treason, to Edinburgh where they were executed. It was for this act that Alexander MacDonald, only surviving son of John, wanted revenge. The personal feud between the two families came to an end through the marriage of MacDonald to Catherine, a daughter of MacIain, although this occurred after MacIain himself had died, probably sometime in the late 1520s.

²³ *ADCP*, 87.

²⁴ *ADCP*, 78, 87-9; *RSS*, i, no 2871; *ALI*, no. 113; A. 52; J. Cameron, *James V: the personal rule 1528-1542* (East Linton, 1998), 240. In 1478 Colin, first earl, had witnessed a charter of John, fourth Lord, while the earl’s daughters married into the MacDonalds and the MacLeods of Lewis. A daughter of Archibald, second earl, married MacIain of Ardnamurchan. For MacIain, a marriage alliance with the house of Argyll facilitated access to crown favour while Argyll could rely on MacIain’s assistance in prosecuting crown commissions in the Highlands.

²⁵ N Maclean-Bristol, *Warriors and Priests: the history of Clan Maclean 1300-1570* (East Linton, 1995), 84-86 argues Lauchlan MacLean of Duart initially joined the rebellion, seeing the opportunity of furthering his own claims in the isles. He took Cairnbulg Castle in Mull, granted recently to Argyll, and shortly afterwards also took the castle of Dunskaith in Sleat with the help of his brother-in-law, Alexander MacLeod of Dunvegan. When the real aims of the rebellion were uncovered the two men abandoned the cause and submitted to Argyll.

²⁶ *ADCP*, 326-7, 340; *RSS*, i, 3048; Cameron, *James V*, 240-1.

plans for a royal expedition to the isles to deal with him, Alexander MacDonald wrote to the king reinforcing the desire of the Islesmen to be 'trew and obedient liegis'.²⁷ As a result, instead of taking action against him, James V attempted to forge closer relations with Alexander of Dunivaig and the Glens, relying on him to establish order in the region. This came at the expense of the earl of Argyll who was deprived, albeit temporarily, of the hereditary office of chamberlain of Kintyre.²⁸ Crown-clan co-operation at this time brought only a temporary relief to unrest, ending when MacDonald died in 1536. However, crown intervention in the isles did not return until 1539 when another rebellion broke out that contained elements of both personal and MacDonald grievance but proclaimed lordship restoration as its aim. Donald Gorm MacDonald of Sleat wasted Trotternish in Skye, formerly part of the earldom of Ross but, post-forfeiture was the focus of a dispute between Sleat and the MacLeods of Dunvegan and Harris, both of whom laid claim to it. Having attacked the MacLeods and hoping to capitalise on his success, Sleat made his way to Ross. This was a logical step considering geographic proximity but it was opportunistic too as Mackenzie of Kintail was absent from his lands at that time. Although Sleat laid waste to the lands of Kinlochew, thereby taking revenge on the Mackenzies who had made further gains in Ross, he was killed in his attempt to take Eilan Donan castle.²⁹

These rebellions commanded attention in the short-term but they did not pose long-term threats to royal authority or the stability of Scotland as a whole. Most used the appeal of lordship restoration to gain support within the Isles but when real objectives were discovered, or when the main protagonist died, this dwindled. Once individuals chiefs realised the rising was doomed, personal agendas came to the fore and they quickly submitted to the crown in order to protect their own interests. Taken together, the risings indicate the level of unrest in the Isles and the tensions within Clan Donald during the first half of the sixteenth century, but they also emphasise the mix of personal, local and lordship agendas at play in the Isles. Dissent within the Clan Donald was evident, as was inter-clan feuding amongst former lordship clans. This was exacerbated by crown policy which was inconsistent and sporadic. While direct intervention in the region did occur, for the most part governance of the west was delegated to regional magnates.

The island battleground: Argyll-Huntly rivalry

The main agents of the crown during this period were the earls of Huntly and the earls of Argyll. Both sought to advance their position at court while extending their influence through the Isles, the west and central Highlands. Thus during the early sixteenth century the Isles became the arena where the power struggle between successive earls of Argyll and Huntly was played out. At the turn of the century each had a very different relationship with the island clans. Colin, first earl of Argyll, was a Gaelic chief aware of his responsibilities to his clansmen and proud of his ability to fulfil them. The Gaelic culture fostered in the west by the Campbells of Argyll and the Clan Donald complimented and enhanced each other, although successive earls of Argyll were considerably more adept at simultaneously maintaining respectability as Lowland magnates.³⁰ Indeed, Argyll's position at court depended a great deal on his government of the west and it was his ability to deliver Highland stability that was relied on to an ever increasing degree during the sixteenth century, a time when crown and Lowland society in general were more aware of, and concerned with, Highland lawlessness. But this did not necessarily lead to a weakening of

²⁷ ADCP, 342, 353.

²⁸ ADCP, 356-8. For further details of this see A Cathcart, 'James V, King of Scotland - and Ireland?' in S Duffy (ed), *The world of the galloglass. Kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200-1600* (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2007), 127-8; Caldwell, *Islay*, 80. Cameron, *James V*, 232-9, argues that although Argyll may have lost the office of chamberlain of Kintyre he was still the most influential magnate in the Isles. The king's treatment of the earl has been interpreted in various ways but he may have been trying to ensure greater financial returns as neither Archibald nor his father, Colin, third earl, had been successful in their execution of this post.

²⁹ HRA, D225/B4/a, f.59; Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 143-6.

³⁰ J Dawson, 'The Fifth Earl of Argyll, Gaelic Lordship and Political Power in Sixteenth Century Scotland', *SHR*, 183 (1988), 1-27; J E A Dawson, *The Fifth Earl of Argyll and the Struggle for Britain and Ireland. The Politics of Religion in the Age of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Cambridge, 2002), 48-83.

alliances with island families. The Campbells of Argyll had co-existed easily with the Clan Donald (and other lordship clans) for centuries and, in contrast to seventeenth-century relations which colours much subsequent historiography of the Highlands, at the turn of the sixteenth century the two clans were on friendly terms and closely connected.³¹

Given these ties with neighbouring clans, it is not clear how the island kindreds viewed Argyll's custody of Donald Dubh. There does not appear to have been any visible signs of hostile opposition to the earl during these early years nor any spontaneous attempts to release the young heir from his confinement. While oral tradition highlights that it coincided with a period of great unrest in the isles this was more likely the result of inter-clan rivalry in the wake of the forfeiture than a reaction to Argyll's actions.³² While ambitious individuals, such as John MacIan of Ardnamurchan, tried to exploit the post-forfeiture dislocation in the Isles for their own benefit thereby heightening local feuding, Argyll's custody of Donald Dubh ensured he would not fall prey to a rival claimant for the lordship.³³ It is unlikely to have been a harsh captivity for the young boy, although what Argyll's main motive was remains in doubt: genuine concern for his grandson, or a more selfish concern for his own, and wider Campbell, interests?³⁴ Certainly this guardianship gave him considerable bargaining power on two fronts: with the island clans and with the crown. Indeed, Argyll used these relations with neighbouring clans to his own advantage and, on a couple of occasions, emphasised to both crown and government that negotiation through him, rather than force, was the most effective means of dealing with the west.³⁵

Argyll's position in and policy towards the region stood in marked contrast to that of Huntly. Like the Campbells of Argyll, the Gordons of Huntly had experienced a steady rise to power following the creation of the earldom in 1445. Although their power base was in the northeast of Scotland, Gordon influence extended throughout Badenoch and Lochaber and the crown came to rely on the earls to deal with affairs in the north Highlands and Isles. Nonetheless, it was Alexander, third earl, who most acutely recognised the opportunities that the weakened lordship and emerging power vacuum in the central Highland region provided. He sought to extend the Gordon power base north and west while at the same time implement crown policy against the MacDonalds.³⁶ But the burgeoning role of the house of Gordon in island affairs did not go unnoticed by Argyll. In 1495 Archibald, second earl of Argyll, was created Master of the Household, while the second earl of Huntly's appointment as Chancellor in 1497 ensured that rivalry between the two would be played out at court and in the west. Over the following years the crown granted commissions to deal with the situation in the west Highlands and Isles to both

³¹ Caldwell, *Islay*, 77; and see note 24 above. By mid-century the house of Argyll had contracted marriages with the MacLeans of Duart and the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the Glens. However, compare the anti-Campbell perspective of A J and A MacDonald, *The Clan Donald*, 3 vols (Inverness, 1896-1904), and see i, 289-90, 298-9 as an example of Campbell 'manipulation'. For a concise exploration of the historiography see S Boardman, *The Campbells 1250-1513* (Edinburgh, 2006), 1-8.

³² 'Book of Clanranald', 163-7; *HP*, i, 47-64.

³³ Both 'Book of Clanranald' and 'History of the MacDonalds' implicitly portray this era of upheaval as one where rival claims for the position of 'Lord of the Isles' were put forward by a number of Islesmen.

³⁴ Caldwell, *Islay*, 77, and n.10 above.

³⁵ During the early part of the sixteenth century successive earls of Argyll continued to build up connections with neighbouring clans in the region. See J Wormald, *Lords and Men in Scotland: bonds of manrent 1442-1603* (Edinburgh, 1985), App. A, 179, no. 8; *The Book of the Thanes of Cawdor. A Series of Papers Selected from the Charter Room at Cawdor 1236-1742* (ed), C Innes (Edinburgh, 1859), 123-4, 128, 129, 131, 133-5, 135, 136-7, 137-8, 138-9, 139-40, 140-1, 144-5, 145-6; Steer & Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 211-12; J Dawson, "'There is Nothing Like a Good Gossip': Baptism, Kinship and Alliance in Early Modern Scotland", *Review of Scottish Culture*, 15 (2002), 88-95, at 91; Cameron, *James V*, 228.

³⁶ Macdougall, *James IV*, 178-9.

men but divided the region between them, relying on Huntly in the North Isles and Argyll in the South Isles.³⁷

The contrast between the methods employed by the earls in executing such commissions was evident during James IV's expedition to the Isles in 1494. While Alexander, Master of Gordon, who would pursue the MacDonalds with vigour, accompanied the king, Argyll was noticeably absent. No doubt he was reluctant to jeopardise his position within the Isles by appearing so blatantly with the crown immediately after the forfeiture.³⁸ This may have won Argyll little favour with the crown, but he was able to manipulate his relations with the island clans to his own advantage and did so early in the sixteenth century to great success. This was evident in his custody of Donald and in 1517 when Argyll asked that "he may schaw to the men of the Ylis that he has the kingis puer to rasayf the men of the Ylis that wyll cum to be kingis gud legis and ... that he may sauffle promyt to get tham thar ramissionis of all crimis by past".³⁹ The three Highland chiefs, MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens, MacLean of Duart and MacLean of Coll submitted promising "to be leyle treow servandis" to the earl "als lang as our gowernyng is dyrektyt tyll hym with all our puer, men, kyn and frendis be sey and be land".⁴⁰ Their offer to work with the earl allowed Argyll to present the case that he was indispensable in the west and the earl's lieutenancy of the Isles was extended to encompass Lochaber, although the parts under the jurisdiction of the earl of Huntly were excepted as were the islands of Bute and Arran.⁴¹

The crown's continued reliance on Huntly must have infuriated Argyll but, as time went on, he had to contend with other issues that threatened to jeopardise his position. The 1520s saw local and personal disputes escalate into feuds resulting in attacks on Campbell lands by Alexander MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens and Lauchlan MacLean of Duart.⁴² These were an expression of the growing resentment towards Argyll and the wider Campbell kindred on account of its increased intervention in the west. Until this time, island aggression had been focused largely on the house of Huntly but the steady consolidation of Argyll's position, heightened hostility. By the mid-sixteenth century this was embodied in the personal animosity shown towards the fourth earl in 1545 by Donald Dubh, heir to the forfeited lordship. Indeed, the grievance articulated towards Argyll in 1545 contrasts sharply with the earl's role in the first Donald Dubh rebellion that broke out in the early years of the sixteenth century.

The rebellions of Donald Dubh

Between 1488 and 1504 there were no less than five revocations.⁴³ One of the early victims of this policy was Torquil MacLeod of Lewis who, in 1498, had received a grant of the office of bailiary of Trotternish with the lands of Duntulm and 'Ardvetfullane' belonging to that office in Skye that had been in crown hands since the forfeiture of 1493. According to the terms of the grant, both office and lands were to be held by Torquil and his heirs by Katherine, daughter of Colin, first earl of Argyll.⁴⁴ This was revoked shortly afterwards and MacLeod's grievance at this turn of events was manipulated in the first rebellion of Donald Dubh. In 1501 Argyll released the young Donald Dubh who made straight for MacLeod, suggesting Donald had a clear agenda.⁴⁵ But it was not just MacLeod who harboured resentment towards the king. The

³⁷ For these various commissions see *RSS*, i, 413, 513, 520, 722-3.

³⁸ MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel?', 266.

³⁹ *ADCP*, 79-80, 89-90.

⁴⁰ *RSS*, i, no. 2851, 2876-8; *ADCP*, 87.

⁴¹ *RSS*, i, no. 2873; Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 115-121.

⁴² A daughter of Archibald, second earl of Argyll, and sister to the third earl, had married Maclean. It had not been a happy union and Maclean had attempted to drown her. In retaliation John Campbell of Cawdor, brother to the third earl, murdered Maclean 'in his bed, wnder silence of nicht' while in Edinburgh. For further details of this incident see Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 128; MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, i, 335-7; *Thanes of Cawdor*, 146-7.

⁴³ *APS*, ii, 236-7, c.22; 240; *TA*, i, 383.

⁴⁴ *ALI*, A 52; *RMS*, ii, no. 2424.

⁴⁵ MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel?', 271, argues it was MacLeod himself who sought the restoration of the lordship at this time. He feared Huntly's 1501 commission of lieutenancy which would be executed forcefully and, as it covered the North Isles, would affect him directly. Argyll,

forfeitures, revocations and subsequent regrants of land had deepened the divisions between the various branches of the Clan Donald and other lordship clans, with individual chiefs vying with each other over land and position. Coupled with James IV's fortifications and establishment of royal garrisons around the coasts, there was general discontent.⁴⁶

The atmosphere within the Isles was ripe for rebellion and the majority of the Islesmen united behind Donald Dubh, attacking royal lands on Bute in 1502 with widespread disorder prevalent throughout the region by the following year. In response Huntly wasted no time in taking military action, using his commission to pursue his vendetta against the MacDonalds in 1504 and in 1506.⁴⁷ But despite action taken by the crown and the ultimate success of Huntly's expeditions into the Isles, the rebellion of Donald Dubh required three government campaigns to suppress it while Donald himself was at large for six years before being imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle in 1506.⁴⁸ Unfortunately for Argyll his action in releasing Donald had not produced the desired result. The balance of power in the west remained unaltered while in 1509 Huntly was given the custody of Inverness Castle and made hereditary sheriff of Inverness, an office which enhanced the bounds of his jurisdiction as it extended over the shires of Inverness, Ross and Caithness.⁴⁹ Although rebellion had been suppressed and Donald Dubh imprisoned, this did not bring an end to the social and economic dislocation faced by the island clans. Indeed, such issues were as much at the forefront of the 1545 rebellion as political concerns.

The grievances of the Islesmen found their fullest expression in the rebellion that broke out in the Isles in 1545.⁵⁰ The 1540 Act of Annexation of lordship lands to the crown and the survey that came in its wake resulted in a significant rental increase for many in the Isles. This had been preceded by legislation to ensure the observance of Scots Law in the region and ongoing royal intervention through successive earls of Argyll and Huntly.⁵¹ The Islesmen who signed the agreement reached with Henry VIII of England at Carrickfergus in 1545 were a disaffected, yet opportunistic, 'political community'.⁵² They exploited the absence of an adult monarch on the throne, expressing their grievances at a time when, so the Islesmen argued, their actions did not constitute a rebellion against the Scottish crown.⁵³ Regardless of how they justified it, the rising was a blatant exploitation of the wider context by all parties involved.

Following the death of James V in 1542 and the repudiation of the Treaties of Greenwich in 1543 Scotland and England were at war. In his effort to force the Scots into accepting Anglo-Scottish union, to be realised through the marriage of Mary Stewart and Edward Tudor, Henry VIII's son, Henry utilised collaboration alongside military force. He relied on 'assured' lords, Scots captured at Solway Moss in 1542 and imprisoned in England, released in order to work towards dynastic union once back in Scotland. He relied also on Matthew Stewart, earl of

meanwhile, regarded the release of Donald Dubh as 'a means of checking the growing power of his rival Huntly'. See also Caldwell, *Islay*, 77.

⁴⁶ A Cathcart, 'The Forgotten '45?: Donald Dubh's rebellion in an archipelagic context', *SHR*, xci:2, no. 232 (October, 2012), 245 and 245 n.31.

⁴⁷ *RSS*, i, no. 792; *The Records of Aboyne MCCXXX-MDCLXXXI* (ed), C Gordon (Aberdeen, 1894), 418.

⁴⁸ Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 102; Cameron, *James V*, 228. Donald was imprisoned in 1506 and his yearly expenses totalled £40. In general most texts are vague as to the year of Donald's imprisonment. *TA*, iii, lxxxii is mistaken when asserting that Donald was imprisoned in Stirling Castle because of a payment on 28 August 1507 of £17 for 'expenss of clathes' to Donald of the Isles, as this was Donald of Lochalsh not Donald Dubh. *TA*, v, 237 shows Donald still in prison in 1524.

⁴⁹ *RMS*, ii, no. 3286.

⁵⁰ For a fuller discussion of the 1545 rebellion see Cathcart, 'The Forgotten '45?', 239-64.

⁵¹ Discontent with the emphasis on Scots Law may explain why Patrick MacLean was designated 'high justiciar of the Isles' in a communication with Henry VIII of August 1545. See Steve Boardman, 'The lost world: post-medieval accounts of the lordship of the Isles' in S Duffy and S Foran (eds), *The English Isles: cultural transmission and political conflict in Britain and Ireland, 1100-1500* (Dublin, 2013), 159-60 and 159 n.25.

⁵² S Boardman, 'The lost world', 161.

⁵³ Cathcart, 'Forgotten '45', 260-1.

Lennox. Lennox had been enticed back to Scotland from France by the emerging anti-English faction in Scotland but he soon became superfluous to their requirements. With little purpose to serve in Scotland and little effort made to secure his continued co-operation, a disgruntled Lennox entered the service of the English king. In June 1544 he agreed to hand over Dumbarton Castle and the Isle of Bute to the English king, relinquish 'all title he [Lennox] pretends to the Crown of Scotland', and acknowledge Henry as 'supreme sovereign and governor of Scotland'. In return Henry granted Lennox the marriage of Margaret Douglas, the king's niece, and agreed that when Henry gained 'the direction and rule of Scotland' Lennox would be appointed governor.⁵⁴ Henry wanted Dumbarton and Bute for strategic reasons, but delivering the castle proved difficult for Lennox who led a failed attack in August 1544, although he did manage to cause havoc along the shore of the Clyde.⁵⁵ With the anti-English party in Scotland gaining ground, Henry needed to instigate plans which required greater military effort. He found allies in the unsettled Highlands and Islands and the recently-liberated Donald Dubh.

By 1 March 1545 Henry's negotiations with Donald Dubh and the Islesmen were much advanced.⁵⁶ At this time Donald was in strong position and taking revenge on the earl of Argyll, while Huntly faced difficulties in his own lands in the central Highlands.⁵⁷ The two earls, preparing for war against Henry on the Borders, were unable to deal with unrest on their estates at the same time and agreed a truce with Donald sometime between mid-March and 1 May 1545.⁵⁸ Truce or no truce, communication between the Islesmen and Henry continued. A commission drawn up in the Isles on 28 July 1545 included the names of most of the island chiefs.⁵⁹ The document stated that Donald Dubh, styled as 'Lord of ye Ilis and Erll of Roiss', with the 'adviss and consent of our barronis and counsaill of ye Ilis' elected two plenipotentiaries to negotiate with Henry.⁶⁰ The English hoped to use the Islesmen to occupy Argyll and Huntly in their respective localities, thereby preventing either earl from deploying his full military capability on the border.⁶¹ Eight days later the island chiefs, with a force of 4,000 Scots, were at Carrickfergus on the east Antrim coast, a place 'more propice for them to serve the King against the Scots than any port in their own land'.⁶² Here they swore an oath of allegiance to Henry and throughout the rest of August and September the finer details of the agreement were honed.

In the light of the devastation caused by the English forces in the south and east of the country, this alliance of the Islesmen with Henry had the potential to cause havoc for Scotland. However, in the end it was disagreement amongst the Highlanders and Islesmen themselves over payment that led to its collapse. After the arrival of the Islesmen at Carrickfergus Lennox, who was needed on the Borders, was recalled. With the expedition postponed Donald Dubh and his

⁵⁴ *L&P Henry VIII*, xix, I, nos. 337, 779 (477); *SP Henry VIII*, v, no. 385-9.

⁵⁵ *SP Henry VIII*, v, no. 395-6; *Hamilton Papers*, ii, no. 317; Donaldson, *Scotland: James V-James VII*, 70.

⁵⁶ *Hamilton Papers*, ii, nos. 414 (562), 416; *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, I, no. 347, 348.

⁵⁷ *Hamilton Papers*, ii, no. 426 (581-2); *Records of Aboyne*, 441-6; Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 157-61. There was clan feuding in the central and eastern Highlands, the area over which Huntly had jurisdiction. While Huntly made efforts to deal with this unrest, he had to leave the discontent to simmer when needed in the south.

⁵⁸ *Hamilton Papers*, ii, nos. 428 (583), 432; *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, I, 664.

⁵⁹ Those missing were James MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens, Torquil MacNeill of Gigha (then an old man), and his son, Niall. For more details see Cathcart, 'Forgotten '45', 256 and 256 n.101-02.

⁶⁰ *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, I, no. 1298. They were Ruari MacAllaster, brother of the captain of Clanranald, Dean of Morvern, and Patrick MacLean, brother of MacLean of Duart, described as 'bailze of Ycomkill and justice clerk of the South Isles'.

⁶¹ *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, I, no. 642, 2 May 1545, refers to 'the earl of the Ellis' who will keep Huntly and Argyll 'occupied'. According to xx, I, no. 1106 (544), 4 July 1545, the English suggested sending 3-4,000 men to aid the Islesmen who were to occupy Huntly and Argyll otherwise a large army would be needed to go to the Borders 'for all Scotland will be there by reason of encouragements of the Frenchmen'.

⁶² *L&P Henry VIII*, xx, II, no. 121. Carrickfergus was well known to the Scots and only a short sail across the North Channel.

forces returned to Scotland to keep a closer eye on events in their own lands. By this stage their concerns about money were pre-eminent and resulted in conflict. Hector MacLean, having taken on the hereditary role of steward of the Isles, had the responsibility of distributing the funds already given by Henry, but this was not done 'to the satisfaction of all' and following the outbreak of internal dissension the force disbanded.⁶³ The proposed rebellion descended into internal petty squabbles, contrasting sharply with its somewhat lofty aims. Donald Dubh went back to Ireland where he is said to have attempted to amass another force to continue with the plan, but he died at Drogheda 'of a fever of five nights'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The period between 1493 and 1545 saw a decisive shift in the balance of power and authority in the west. The forfeiture of 1493 and subsequent legislation curtailed MacDonald influence in the west and ensured the decades following were turbulent for the Clan Donald and former lordship clans. The fissures of dissent evident at the end of the fifteenth century were exacerbated by an ineffective and inconsistent crown policy which lurched from one strategy to another, sending mixed messages. In the wake of the forfeiture James IV saw the need to establish something of a buffer between Lowland Scotland and the western Highlands and Isles, and set about restricting MacDonald influence to the western seaboard while establishing loyal clans in the central and eastern Highlands, a policy his son and successor, James V, also followed.⁶⁵ Both kings relied, to varying degrees, on successive earls of Argyll and Huntly and delegated to them responsibility for law and order. Numerous commissions of lieutenancy to these earls resulted in the extension of Gordon and Campbell authority in the west, at the expense of the Clan Donald.⁶⁶ A cursory glance at affairs in the west in the early sixteenth century would suggest that 1493 was an end point; the final nail in the coffin of MacDonald power.

A more detailed analysis, however, highlights nuance that points to a different reading of events. Although the rebellions that occurred in the west were an indicator of the extent of unrest and discontent that prevailed in the wake of the forfeiture this period should not be regarded as one where the crown triumphed over lawless, Highland subjects. Unquestionably the lordship came to an end with the 1493 forfeiture and while genuine efforts to restore it were doomed, this does not mean the MacDonalds, as a force in the west, were finished. The clan was divided by policy and weakened by internal dissent, but Clan Donald influence in the west continued. Indeed, both James IV and James V showed themselves willing to work with the MacDonalds. When, for example, James V looked to Alexander MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens to secure peace and stability in the west it was recognition of the enduring power the clan held within the region. The death of Donald Dubh in 1545 may have left the Islesmen bereft of a focal point for their discontent and heightened a prevailing sense of dislocation. But throughout the second half of the sixteenth century Scottish monarchs would turn time and again to the MacDonalds as the prevailing political force in the west, regardless of the expansive influence of the Campbells of Argyll.

The death of Donald Dubh following the abortive 1545 rising did not bring an end to aspirations of lordship restoration, but neither did it bring an end to Clan Donald power in Scotland.⁶⁷ Indeed, in the latter half of the sixteenth century the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and

⁶³ 'Book of Clanranald', ii, 167.

⁶⁴ 'The Book of Clanranald', 167, states that he left no child. However, Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles*, 176-7; MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, i, 386 suggest that he left an illegitimate son in the care of Henry.

⁶⁵ This was not a new initiative as James II had following a similar policy in the mid-fifteenth century. See Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage*, 40-56.

⁶⁶ And also the expansion of the Mackenzies of Kintail.

⁶⁷ A MacCoinnich, 'His spirit was given only to warre': conflict and identity in the Scottish *Gáidhealtachd*, c.1580-c.1630' in S Murdoch and A Mackillop (eds), *Fighting for Identity: Scottish Military Experience, c.1550-1900* (Leiden, 2002), 147-8 shows that claims to the lordship by other branches of the MacDonalds continued into the mid-seventeenth century.

the Glens remained political players in both Scotland and Ireland.⁶⁸ The establishment of a branch of the Clan Donald in the Glens of Antrim at the turn of the fifteenth century had provided something of a safe haven. Following the execution of his father and brothers and the forfeiture of their lands, Alexander of Dunivaig and the Glens took refuge in Ulster until his fortunes in Scotland changed. His marriage to the daughter of MacIain of Ardnamurchan coupled with the period of co-operation between himself and James V brought Alexander to greater prominence in the west. His son, James MacDonald, married Agnes Campbell, daughter of Colin, third earl of Argyll, in 1545 and the same year received a heritable possession of lands in Kintyre he had formerly leased, regranted by the crown as part of the Barony of Bar. He received further lands in Kintyre and Islay in 1562. James' sons, notably Angus and Sorley Boy, remained pivotal figures on either side of the North Channel that neither Scottish nor English monarchs could afford to ignore. Indeed, Elizabeth I formally granted Sorley Boy a patent of denization along with lands in Antrim in 1586 while James VI would turn to Angus MacDonald of Dunivaig and the Glens in his efforts to pacify the west of Scotland.⁶⁹ In 1603 one of the first grants James made as king of three kingdoms was to Randal MacDonnell (MacDonald) of Antrim, signalling the continued role of the MacDonalds throughout the seventeenth century.⁷⁰ In the post-1493 (or post-1545) world the Clan Donald, albeit divided into distinct branches, was neither down nor out.

⁶⁸ There is not the space here to explore the ongoing political influence of other branches of the Clan Donald such as MacDonalds of Sleat, the Clanrannald, or the MacDonnells of Glenarry.

⁶⁹ *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts preserved in the archiepiscopal library at Lambeth, 1515-1624* (ed), J S Brewer & W Bullen, 6 vols (London, 1867-73), ii, nos 611, 614; *RPCS*, vi, 321. At the same time Elizabeth granted lands in the Glens to Angus MacDonald as well. For more on the MacDonalds in Ireland post-1545 see C Brady, 'The MacDonalds and the provincial strategies of Hugh O'Neill' in W P Kelly and J R. Young (eds), *Scotland and the Ulster Plantations. Explorations in the British Settlements of Stuart Ireland* (Dublin, 2009), 41-61; J M Hill, 'The rift within Clan Iain Mhór: the Antrim and Dunyveg MacDonnells, 1590-1603', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 24 (1993), 869-82; J M Hill, *Fire and Sword: Sorley Boy MacDonnell and the rise of Clan Iain Mhór, 1538-1590* (London, 1993). For a brief overview of the MacDonalds in Scotland post-1545 see A Cathcart, 'Scots and Ulster: the late medieval context' in Kelly and Young (eds), *Scotland and the Ulster Plantations*, 62-83.

⁷⁰ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland [hereafter PRONI], Earl Antrim Papers, D2977/5/1/1/1/2; D2977/5/1/1/2/2; *Calendar of Irish Patent Rolls of James I. Facsimile of the Irish Record Commission's Calendar* (Dublin, 1996), 58. For more on the MacDonalds in the seventeenth century see MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, iii; D Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the seventeenth century* (Edinburgh, 1980); J H Ohlmeyer, *Civil War and Restoration in the three Stuart kingdoms: the career of Randal MacDonnell, marquis of Antrim, 1609-1683* (Cambridge, 1993).